

Tajikistan, Russia and Migrant Workers

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Since the beginning of his third term as president, Putin has promoted the creation of the “Eurasian Union” as one of Russia’s major foreign policy goals. In fact, what Moscow wants to construct is not much a neo-Soviet project, as some of the proponents of neo-Eurasianism assumed at the beginning of Putin’s tenure, but a sort of neo-imperial construction. It looks more similar to the European colonial empires of the 19th century, whereby the UK, France and other powers benefited economically from their colonial possessions. This model gave rise to resistance among the potential member states across the post-Soviet space, and Moscow has used a variety of methods to persuade and indeed compel the potential members of this neo-imperial project to join. Emigration is one of the key tools in this sense. The point here is that millions of workers come to Russia from impoverished Central Asian states. Tajikistan is one of these states. Throughout 2013 Moscow has reiterated its threat to limit the numbers of guest workers from Tajikistan, or even to deport those already in Russia unless Dushanbe accepted Moscow’s demands. This approach works.



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Tajikistan, one of the poorest states in Central Asia, has a tense relationship with neighboring Uzbekistan and also faces a potential threat from Islamist radicals in Afghanistan. This threat will most likely increase after the withdrawal of U.S., and NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014. Emomali Rakhmon, Tajikistan's president, has been in an ongoing search for geopolitical patron. While such diverse players as China, the U.S. and Iran are seen as potential patrons, it is Russia that looks like the more natural choice, able to shield Tajikistan from potential military threats. Russia is also a major source of hard currency, given that according the Russian Federal Migration Service's 2013 figures, there are approximately 1.11 million Tajiks working in Russia,¹ sending considerable sums home to Tajikistan. The Tajik migrants have become Moscow's trump card and after continued pressure, Dushanbe finally succumbed. Re-elected Rakhmon caved into Moscow's demands to keep Russian bases open on Tajik territory practically free of charge. At the same time, the migrant issue indicated that Moscow might well use the same tactic to deal with other former Soviet republics that send considerable numbers of migrants to Russia.

In 2012 alone, Tajik migrant workers sent 3.8 billion USD in remittances back home, up 31 percent year-on-year and equal to 47 percent of Tajikistan's GDP.

Background

Tajikistan seems to have had no problem in identifying potential patrons. Russia emerged as a sort of logical option. This was not only due to the fact that Moscow had been Tajikistan's imperial master for so long, but also because Russia employs thousands of Tajik *Gastarbeiter* who send millions of dollars home. In 2012 alone, Tajik migrant workers sent 3.8 billion USD in remittances back home, up 31 percent year-on-year and equal to 47 percent of Tajikistan's GDP.² Finally, Russian troops play an important role in preventing the penetration of Islamists from the South. Still, the relationship with Moscow was hardly harmonious, although it appears to have improved since the fall of 2012. Dushanbe agreed to keep Russia's military base for free in return for Moscow's implicit protection of the Rakhmon regime, and considerable economic and military assistance.

Yet soon after acquiescing to Moscow's demands, Rakhmon declared that he did not see any true benefits in security arrange-

¹В России работает более миллиона таджикских мигрантов – ФМС, (In Russia living more than a million Tajik worker) Tajik Portal, April 2013, available at http://tjk.rus4all.ru/city_msk/20130408/723990951.html

² Tajik Migrants in Russia Send \$3.8 Bln Home, Ria Novosti, 25 January 2013, available at <http://en.ria.ru/world/20130125/179026395.html>

ments with Russia's sponsored military organization. One might wonder about Dushanbe's sudden change of heart. It appears illogical when we consider the threat posed by Afghanistan, especially after the departure of U.S. troops in 2014, together with the failure of negotiations with Uzbekistan on the water distribution problem.³ One of the major possible reasons that Rakhmon was displeased with Russia was Moscow's statement that Russian forces in Tajikistan would not be engaged in the internal conflict in the country.⁴ This message was very likely unsettling for Rakhmon, who saw Moscow as the powerful "krysha" (roof) – i.e. protector of his regime.

It is therefore unsurprising that Rakhmon decided that he needed to fend for himself, and looked for additional backup, as well as demanding more from the Kremlin. Consequently he demanded a dramatic increase in Russian investment, not just in Tajikistan's hydro-electric project⁵ but also in other areas. Dushanbe's rancor was enhanced by the fact that Bishkek received more financial assistance for its army. Saimiddin Dustov, head of the Dushanbe-based think tank Indem, complained, "The Kremlin does not fulfill its promises, and the Tajik authorities are not capable of defending their national interests." He added that Tajik authorities are annoyed that Moscow appears to treat Dushanbe as a second class citizen, even within the context of Central Asia, claiming that Kyrgyzstan has received [or stands to receive] assistance from Russia to the tune of 1 billion USD for the deployment of Russian military base on its territory, five times more than what Tajikistan was offered [in technical assistance and equipment]."⁶

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By March 2013 the tension between Dushanbe and Moscow had heated up significantly. On March 15th, the Chief of Russian General Staff and the Minister of Defense of Tajikistan had discussed the October 2012 agreement between Putin and Rakhmon.⁷ The negotiations were apparently unsuccessful. This led to the cancellation of the visit to Tajikistan by the First Vice-Premier of

3 Sergei Kozhemiakin, "Spor iz-za vody prodolzhaetsia. Uzbekistan i Tadjikistan k soglasiu ne prishli," *Central Asia.ru*, 25 April, 2013.

4 "Tadjikistan i Rossiia: Druz'ia, soiuzniki, koloniia i metropoliia?," *Ozodagon*, 22 Apreal, 2013.

5 Konstantin Parshin, "Tajikistan: Is Dushanbe setting new conditions for Russia's military presence?," *EurasiaNet.org*, 5 April, 2013.

6 Konstantin Parshin, "Tadjikistan: Is Moscow getting ready to punch Dushanbe?," *EurasiaNet.org*, 30 April, 2013.

7 "Nachal'nik Genshtaba VS Rossii obeshchal vmesti s Tadjikistanom sokhranit' mir v raione," *Fergana.ru*, 15 March, 2013.

Russia, Igor Shuvalov.⁸ Moscow immediately retaliated by issuing threats. Leonid Savin, an independent political observer, noted that if Rakhmon was going to create problems for Moscow, he could be replaced by a “more reasonable” person. This could be justified to the West as “promoting democracy” and noted that Rakhmon should remember the fate of Kurmanbek Bakiev, the former Kyrgyz president who did not fit Moscow design and was ultimately ousted.⁹ Allusions to Bakiev’s removal were not accidental and some observers believed that Moscow is already preparing for Rakhmon’s removal, following a similar strategy to the one used for Bakiev.

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region.

Thus: “Analysts in Moscow and Dushanbe are debating the implications of the media attacks. Some believe that the press campaign should be seen by Rakhmon as a troubling omen, pointing out that the similar campaign against former Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev in 2010 was accompanied by a Kremlin hike in energy tariffs. Bakiev’s regime collapsed shortly after Russia imposed its tariff hike.”¹⁰ Russian observers noted that there are several ways to make Rakhmon more agreeable, or simply to remove him from office. There was hint that Moscow could side with Uzbekistan in its conflict with Tajikistan over the flow of a river in the region.¹¹ While

this threat is apparently under consideration – Karimov and Putin met to demonstrate that the conflicts between them are not irreconcilable – most Russian observers believed that it is economic pressure that would most likely make Rakhmon more pliable, or simply remove him from power. Moscow was ready to take action to destabilize the Rakhmon regime.

Implications

There are several ways in which Moscow has sought to create economic, and consequently political, problems for Rakhmon. Pundits have noted that the deterioration of the Moscow - Dushanbe relationship could well affect Russian involvement in Tajikistan’s major economic projects, such as building hydro

8 “‘K’: Tadjikistan podvodit rossiiskuiu bazu pod svoiu armiiu. Rossii vydvynuty novye usloviia arendy,” *CentralAsia.ru*, 19 March, 2013.

9 “Nado li Rossii torgovat’sia s Tadjikistanom is-za voennoi bazy:mneniia,” <http://www.jarex.ru/print/34917.html>, 27 March, 2013.

10 Parshin, “Tajikistan: Is Moscow getting ready to punch Dushanbe?,” *EurasiaNet.org*, 30, April, 2013.

11 “Nado li Rossii torgovat’sia s Tadjikistanom iz-za voennoi bazy:mneniia,”

electric plants. One Russian observer has commented that the Sangtudinskaia Power Station is “the only big Russia – Tadzhik project in Tajikistan.” The station could be forced to close down because it has not received payment for the electricity it has sold to various companies,¹² and at least in April 2013, Moscow implied that it would not do anything to help Dushanbe avoid this outcome. The fact that Iran was a major sponsor of the project was conveniently overlooked by Russian commentators.

In addition, Moscow, following its old practice, found problems with imported Tajikistan goods. “Already, according to some media reports, Moscow is pulling a ‘soft power’ lever, namely city governments across Russia have reportedly stopped accepting shipments of Tajik fruits and vegetables.”¹³ The most serious threat is to create problems for Tajikistan’s *gastarbeiter* in Russia, first raised in March of 2013 when an independent Russian analyst noted that Tajikistan, more than any other country in Central Asia, needs to maintain a good relationship with Moscow because “around million Tajiks (1/8 of the entire population) is in Russia.” By April 2013, the threat was more pronounced: Vladimir Zhirinovskii, a nationalist MP of the Duma (Russian Parliament) stated that if Russia deported Tajik migrants, Tajikistan would be in the hands of Islamists.¹⁴ The implication is that Tajikistan is barely holding ground right now with millions of dollars being sent home from Russia by Tajiks workers. If millions of unemployed and embittered men are returned, the economy and the social structure would collapse, and Islamists will take advantage of those conditions.

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Zhirinovskii was not the only one who has threatened to create problems for Tajik migrants. Dmitry Rogozin, Deputy Prime Minister of Russia and in charge of the defense industry, also warned that Kremlin would make it hard for Tajiks to enter Russia, and many have implied that the collapse of Tajikistan economy and society would not just remove Rakhmon from power, but would endanger his very physical survival.¹⁵ Two of Russia’s leading nationalist gadflies – vice premier Dmitry Rogozin

12 “‘AP’: Tadzhikistan-Rossia. Vremia platit’ po shchetam...,” *CentralAsia.ru*, 26 April, 2013.

13 Parshin, “Tadjikistan: Is Moscow getting ready to punish Dushanbe?,” *EurasiaNet.org*, 30, April, 2013.

14 “Shli by Vy v/na...MID Rossii vezhlivo otvetil na notu Tadzhijskoi storony,” *CentralAsia.ru*, 26 April, 2013.

15 “A. Sarkorova: Duzhanbe vozmushchen vyskazyvaniiami rosiiskikh politikov,” *CentralAsia.ru*, 25 April, 2013.

Two of Russia's leading nationalist gadflies – vice premier Dmitry Rogozin and the State Duma's vice speaker and Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky – have led the chorus of criticism of Tajikistan. Both have played up the need for Russia to introduce a visa regime for Central Asian labor migrants, especially those from Tajikistan.

and the State Duma's vice speaker and Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky – have led the chorus of criticism of Tajikistan. Both have played up the need for Russia to introduce a visa regime for Central Asian labor migrants, especially those from Tajikistan. Zhirinovsky was especially blunt in his threats. In comments broadcast on the state television channel RTR on April 18, Zhirinovsky castigated Tajik authorities for delaying the ratification of the military base deal, hinting that President Imomali Rakhmon's administration was simply trying to wangle money out of the Russian government. Zhirinovsky also cautioned Rakhmon that in playing games with Russia, he was playing with fire. If Dushanbe lacked Russia's backing, he warned, "Afghan Islamists would overrun Tajikistan, and they would hang him (Rakhmon) in the center of Dushanbe, like they did with Najibullah [the former Afghan communist-era leader]." ¹⁶

Following this direct threat, some Russian observers also noted that Rakhmon's rule could end badly, and that it was none other but Putin who had warned Rakhmon about the instability of his leadership in the case of social / political shakeup, during an October 2012 visit. Moscow has signaled that it is ready to act and that public opinion is behind possible action against Tajikistan migrants. Russian authorities have provided a variety of justifications for this action. Already in April 2013, Russia claimed that Tajikistan is a hotbed of terrorism, posing a risk to Russian territory. ¹⁷ This allegation was accepted by the public and in Moscow "a series of small demonstrations in cities on April 14 echoed the call for stricter migration controls for labor migrants." ¹⁸ The incitement of anti-migrant feelings – either against "Caucasians" or Central Asians – is easy; such attitudes are fairly common among Russians.

Russia's threats were not empty ones. Russian authorities sought to create problems for Tajik trains transiting Russian territory. ¹⁹ "An April 23 roundtable discussion, broadcast by the Rossiya

16 Konstantin Parshin, "Tajikistan: Is Moscow getting ready to punish Dushanbe?" *EurasiaNet.org*, 30 April, 2013.

17 "S. Bochkov: Rossiya plus Tadjikistan – novyi kanal perepravki boevikov," *CentralAsia.ru*, 11 April, 2013.

18 Parshin, "Tajikistan: Is Moscow getting ready to punish Dushanbe?" *EurasiaNet.org*, 30 April, 2013.

19 Pairav Chorshanбиеv, "Rossiya khochet vytesnit' Tadjikistan s rynka zheleznodorozhnykh uslug," *news.tj*, 23 April, 2013.

channel, featured a mini-documentary called ‘Shaitan-train’, examining the operations of trains connecting Dushanbe and Moscow. Panelists then expressed critical views about the existing labor migration practices and piled in with calls for a stronger visa regime.”²⁰ One of the proposals was to allow Tajiks to enter Russia by using different type of passport. The point here is that Tajiks, similar to Russians, have two types of passport. One is for domestic use and the other for international travel. Citizens have to apply for the international passport, which is a cumbersome and expensive process. Some Russian officials have proposed that Tajiks should be required to show a foreign passport to enter Russia,²¹ which would significantly complicate travel to Russia.

In addition to its arsenal of political and economic threats, Moscow has tried to employ carrots, or at least promise of carrots. During the May 2013 meeting between Rakhmon and Putin, Putin hinted that trade between Russia and Tajikistan could be increased.²² Nonetheless, the meeting did not yield any tangible results, despite Putin’s belief that Rakhmon would speed up the ratification of the fall 2012 treaty on the conditions for the Russian base in Tajikistan.²³ This led to new array of negative articles from May to July of 2013 in the Russian media on how poor, corrupt and fundamentally unstable Tajikistan is. According to the contributors, the Tajikistan economy faces absolute failure, as demonstrated by the problems with the construction of Rogun hydro station. According to them, while the government collected considerable sums from the population, it remains unable to complete Rogun.²⁴

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As a matter of fact, the observers asserted Rogun should never be built because its operation would irreversibly damage the environment.²⁵ One might add here that construction work for Rogun

20 Parshin, “Tajikistan: Is Moscow getting ready to punish Dushanbe?,” EurasiaNet.org, 30, April, 2013.

21 M. Beliakov, “Zloveshchie podarki iz Tadjikistana,” *CentralAsia.ru*, 16 May, 2013.

22 “Rakhmon poprosil Putina byt’ vnimatel’nei k Tsentral’noi Azii,” *Islam News*, 28 May, 2013.

23 “Putin i Rakhmon obsudiat voprosy voennoi pomoshchi Tadjikistanu,” *Islam News*, 28 May, 2013.

24 “Tadzh Vlasti natriasli s naseleniia \$200 millionov za aksii Roguna,” *CentralAsia.ru*, 26 July, 2013; “Economist: Tadjikistan nesposoben v odinokku postroit’ Rogunskuiu GES,” *CentralAsia.ru*, 26 July, 2013.

25 A. Odeberdiev, “Dutye dostoinstva i real’nye ugrozy Rogunskoi GES,” *CentralAsia.ru*, 1 August, 2013.

was practically stopped by 2012.²⁶ The Tajik population was literally starving, noted the observers. Indeed, it was dire poverty which pushed traditional Tajik women to engage in prostitution, which is now spreading in Tajikistan.²⁷ Together with prostitution, Tajikistan is a hotbed of dangerous pandemic diseases²⁸ and drug trafficking.²⁹ The Russian press also pressed the point that it is not just Moscow that regards Dushanbe as the source of drug and human trafficking but also international organizations.³⁰ While the Tajik population suffers from disease, crime and Islamic extremism have flourished. Indeed, while the population is starving, the local administrations engage in PR-type projects costing huge amounts of money.³¹

This corrupt society is reinforced by authoritarian system with leader who is clinging to power regardless. Indeed, Rakhmon want to imitate the authoritarian leaders in the area. He deals brutally with any opposition and wants to be president for life.³² It is clear, as observers implied, that Tajikistan is actually a failing state unable to resist any external threat, with its army resembling bands of hungry ragamuffins with outdated weapons.³³ It was implied here that the Rakhmon regime is extremely unstable and that it would not take much to ensure the regime's downfall. Consequently potential problems with Tajik migrants in Russia could have devastating implications for Dushanbe. Moscow is quite ready to take a step in this direction, and not just because of the problems with Dushanbe but also due to the problems with migrant workers from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which, according to these observers, present the most serious danger for Russia.³⁴ All of these publications convey Moscow's clear

26 "Stroika veka Rogun prevrashchaetsia v sekretnyi ob'ekt," <http://www.avesta.tj/rogun/13259-stroyka-veka-rogun-prevraschaetsya-v-sekretnyi-obekt...>, 23 July, 2012.

27 Makhropa Kiroмова, "V Tadjikistane rastet chislo prostitutok," *CentralAsia.ru*, 27 July, 2013.

28 "Na severe Tadjikistana shiritsia epidemiia sibirskoi iazvy," *CentralAsia.ru*, 17, July, 2013; R. Samiev, "Tadjikskie deti stradiut ot neizvestnoi bolezni," *CentralAsia.ru*, 29 July, 2013.

29 M. Beliaikov, "Zloveshchie podarki iz Tadjikistana," *Central Asia.ru*, 16 May, 2013.

30 D. Inomzoda, "Molodoe podspor'e 'dzhikhadistov' v Tadjikistane," *CentralAsia.ru*, 20 July, 2013; B. Sokiev, "Pravitel'stvo Tadjikistana ozabocheno rostom ekstrimizma v strane," *CentralAsia.ru*, 1 August, 2013.

31 "Blesk nishchety. Gissarskaia meriia zakazala tadjhiuveliram napol'nye chasy s 3 tys. ametistov, tsenoi \$600 tys," *CentralAsia.ru*, 18 July, 2013.

32 "Chem Emomali ne Gurbanguly. Prezident Tadjikistana gotovit sebja k pozhiznennomu prezidentstvu," *CentralAsia.ru*, 20 July, 2013; M. Saidkhodzhaev, "Tadjikskaja al'ternativa – propravitel'stvennye zombi protiv politicheskikh trupov," *CentralAsia.ru*, 22 July, 2013.

33 S. Asomiddinov, "Tadjikistan. Golodnyi shchit gosudarstva," *CentralAsia.ru*, 22 July, 2013.

34 S. Pirov, "Migratsionnye protsessy v Tadjikistane ugrozhaiut stranam SNG," *Central Asia.ru*, 3 July, 2013.

displeasure with Dushanbe, and demonstrate the Kremlin's clear intention to use a variety of means to express this, most notably by targeting the migrant workers as a means to pressure, or if necessary, to destabilize the regime.

Dushanbe has responded to this by increasing its flirtations with China and the West. Dushanbe has focused on its relationship with China as a major source of cash. In May 2013, Rakhmon visited China, and following negotiations, the Chinese side agreed to invest 300 million USD in Tajikistan.³⁵ Both the Chinese and Tajikistan leadership are designing plans to further develop the China – Tajikistan relationship until 2019, and have proclaimed that China and Tajikistan will develop their relationship to “strategic level.”³⁶

This trajectory has made Moscow quite unhappy, and various articles published in June and July 2013 demonstrate this. In the view of Russian media commentators, China is Tajikistan's last hope, as no other countries are interested in investing in such a corrupt place.³⁷ Still, as suggested, the Chinese will likely soon lose interest, at which point dysfunctional Tajikistan would finally collapse.³⁸ The catastrophic scenario of Tajikistan's cooperation with China has also been elaborated. According to that view, Chinese “migrational invasions” could lead to the displacement of the native population, turning Tajikistan into a desert. Indeed, these articles have drawn implicit comparisons between the Chinese and locusts, suggesting that Chinese migrants would cause environmental damage.³⁹

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Other media commentators have suggested that China could help the Tajik regime, though at a price – namely the transformation of Tajikistan's infrastructure in a way that would boost economic development in China's raw material appendix.⁴⁰ China is not

35 V. Panfilova, “Dushanbe beret kurs na Pekin. Tadjikistan sdelał vybor v pol'zu sotrudnichestva s Kitaem,” *Central Asia.ru*, 22 May, 2013.

36 “Rakhmon vykliančil v Pekine obeshčanie gumpomoshchi 32 mln. za sdachu ostatkov Murgabskogo raiona,” *Central Asia.ru*, 20 May, 2013.

37 G. Akramshoev, “V boi idut odni kitaitsy. Iranskii biznes pokidaet Tadjikistan,” *CentralAsia.ru*, 16 July, 2013.

38 P. Mullodzhanov, “Spasut li tadjikov Kitai s Rossiei, ili komu my nuzhny, krome samikh sebia?,” *CentralAsia.ru*, 18 July, 2013.

39 Salokiddin Sadridinzoda, “Tadjikistan – kto prikhodit za rabotoi i ukhodit s oslom,” *Central Asia*, 12 August, 2013.

40 A. Mustov, “Tadjikistan prevrashchaetsia v syr'evoi pridatok Kitaia?,” *CentralAsia.ru*, 22 July, 2013.

seen by observers as Tajikistan's only possible alternative. Iran, with which Tajikistan shares a common ethnic and cultural heritage, has been posited as another option. Iran has been engaged in various forms of cooperation with Tajikistan for awhile. For example, Iran was involved in building the Sangtudinskaia Hydroelectric Station (GES)-2 and with plans to build other similar stations. This was, at least, the case several years ago⁴¹ and Tehran does seem interested in developing a commercial relationship with Dushanbe.⁴² This direction also displeases Moscow, whose relationship with Tehran is not an easy one. In the view of Russian observers, Iran's interest in Tajikistan is waning because it is impossible to pursue a normal business relationship with Dushanbe.⁴³ The other interpretation suggested that Tajikistan would be absorbed by Iran, at least indirectly.⁴⁴ Yet another view argues that Dushanbe's economic cooperation with Tehran is essentially meaningless for Sangtudinskaia GES-2, given that the project remains unfinished despite Iranian promises.⁴⁵

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While China is clearly seen as the major source of cash and help from Iran is also taken into account, it should also be recalled that Dushanbe has not turned its back entirely on the West and has cooperated with NATO and the U.S. for over a decade. Since 2001, the "engineering troops for support or NATO forces which comprise 300 French military personnel" have been stationed in Dushanbe.⁴⁶ The USA also invested considerable sums in strengthening Tajikistan borders. In 2012, the French delegation visited Tajikistan and signed an agreement to the effect that French forces would remain in Afghanistan even after NATO's withdrawal at the end of 2014. In the same year, a "huge training center for Tajikistan servicemen" was launched.⁴⁷ It was financed by the U.S., and entailed a partnership between Tajikistan and NATO. In April 2013, the NATO

41 "Tadzhikskie i iranske energetiki rassmatrivaliut tekhnicheskie parametry proekta stroitel'stva GES 'Aini'," *Iran News*, 29 August, 2012.

42 "V Dushanbe proshla vstrecha delovykh krugov Tadzhikistana i Irana," *Iran News*, 16 September, 2013.

43 "Iranskaia kompaniia obviniaet 'Tadzhik-Eir'," *CentralAsia.ru*, 7 July, 2013.

44 P. Romanov, "Tadzhikistan v ozhidanii novogo vitka iranskoi ekspansii," *CentralAsia.ru*, 22 July, 2013. On the critic of this view, see "D. Pano: Terra incognita. Iran i Tadzhikistan (polemika S. P. Romanovym)," *CentralAsia.ru*, 22 July, 2013.

45 "Sangtudinskuii GES-2 planiruiut zapustit' v kontse goda," *Central Asia.ru*, 12 August, 2013.

46 S. Kozhemiakin, "Tadzhikistan. Opasnyi kurs lavirovaniia," *Pravda*, 8 August, 2013.

47 A. Muminov, "Bluzhdaiushchaia baza Manas perekochuet v Kazakhstan?" *kursiv.kz*, 23 August, 2013.

General Secretary visited Tajikistan and reaffirmed the NATO / Tajikistan relationship. Lately there have been rumors that although the “U.S. is to close its base in ‘Manas’ (Kyrgyzstan), it could well reopen a similar base in Tajikistan.”⁴⁸

In the scope of its flirtations with a variety of partners, Dushanbe has become enterprising. For example, an airfield in Aini has been promised to Russia, UK, the U.S. and even India, and the negotiations with all of these partners are likely to continue through July 2013.⁴⁹ Some observers believed that India might just be an intermediary. Under that scenario, India, upon receiving the base from Russia, would deliver it to NATO.⁵⁰ Some believed that Rakhmon has already made up his mind and received assurance from Washington of its support.⁵¹ This notion appears quite plausible if one remembers that Rakhmon held talks with a high-ranking American general in late July 2013 and demanded and received payment for using the “okno” (window) station that provided the Russian military with the means to monitor practically any object in the Earth’s orbit.⁵² Finally, in August 2013, Tajikistan engaged in NATO / Kazakhstan-sponsored military maneuvers in Kazakhstan.⁵³

All of these foreign policy moves clearly irritate Putin, who apparently invited Rakhmon to visit Moscow on August 1, 2013. The negotiations were inconclusive, and Russia’s response to Rakhmon’s visit was rather skeptical. Centrist newspaper *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* noted that Rakhmon came to Moscow empty-handed⁵⁴ and he should understand that a “multi vector” foreign policy is for “clever and strong” leaders – a category into which he definitely does not fall.⁵⁵ The Kremlin implicitly warned that the attempt to engage with NATO / the U.S. on one hand and China and Iran – the U.S./ NATO enemy – on the other could lead not just to a foreign policy debacle but to the collapse of the regime.⁵⁶ The contributor to the newspaper implied that Ra-

48 Ibid.

49 “Britanskii lev prygnul na Kaspïi,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 1, July, 2013.

50 V. Panfilova, “Moskva zhdet iasnosti ot Bishkeka i Dushanbe,” *Central Asia.ru*, 29 May, 2013.

51 Arkadii Dubnov, “Evraziistvo nachinaet nabukhat”; *Novoi-Kazakhstan*, 15 May, 2013.

52 Khamid Abdulloev, “‘Okno’ obizali platit’ nalogi,” *Ozodagon*, 26 July, 2013.

53 “Kazakhstan, NATO provodiat sovместnye mirotvorcheskie ucheniia ‘Stepnoi orel – 2013,’” *Fergana*, 14 August, 2013.

54 “Rakhmon privez Putinu ocherednye obeshchaniia,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 2 August, 2010.

55 “SShA moderniziruet armiiu Tadzhikista,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 31 July, 2013.

56 Kozhemiakin, “Tadzhikistan Opasnyi kurs lavirovaniia.”

khmon needs to understand that his position is extremely precarious. It was not just the rumors about a war with Uzbekistan⁵⁷ over plans to regulate the flow of water⁵⁸ but appalling domestic economic conditions which Russian commentators presented as evidence. The stream of articles – either written by Russian authors or taken from foreign sources – are intended to demonstrate the dire conditions in the country. According to these observers, the state coffers are pretty much empty, which has pushed the government to increase taxation.⁵⁹ The dearth of employment opportunities has meant very few of the Tajiks who study abroad are returning home.⁶⁰

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Thus, Tajikistan is in dire straits economically, and aside from the money sent by migrant workers in Russia, there are no other sources of cash.⁶¹ And Tajiks have no place to go beside Russia. Indeed, observers have noted that the current economic conditions have led to an exodus to Russia not just by men but also women, which is quite unusual for Tajikistan.⁶² The role of migrants has become so important for the economy that the Tajik authorities classified the amount of money which migrant workers send back; figures are not made public.⁶³ Nonetheless, they cannot hide the fact that migrants send considerable sums back to Tajikistan and that this line of cash inflow is a major crutch for the economy.⁶⁴

It is also noted by observers that Dushanbe is wrong to assume that Tajik migrants are of any importance for Russia. They actually create a problem. Indeed, as Russian observers noted, they have actually created problems in Moscow's dealings with the West. According to these observers, Russia has actually done Tajikistan a favor. The point here, insist the observers, is that Russia is in the process of negotiating changes in visa requirements

57 "Rakhmon ishchet podderzhki Putina," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 29 July, 2013

58 "M. Opazgulyevy Rogunskaiia GES. Ne myt'em, tak katan'em," *CentralAsia.ru*, 23 August, 2013; "DW": Tadjikistan delaet stavku na 'vodnuiu diplomatiu'," *CentralAsia.ru*, 23 August, 2013.

59 "Svadebnykh pevtsov v Tadjikistane oblozhili ezhemesiachnym nalogom v razmere \$113," *Aziia-Plus*, 21 August, 2013.

60 Shakhodat Shaibnazarova, "IWPR: Obrazovatel'nyi defitsit v Tadjikistane," *Inozpress.kg*, 20 August, 2013.

61 Sukhrob Shamolov, "Tadjikistan – odna nadezhda na denezhnye perevody migrantov," *CentralAsia.ru*, 21 August, 2013.

62 Ibid.

63 G. Faskhutdinov, "Tadjikistan – den'gi migrantov pod grifom 'sekretno'," *CentralAsia.ru*, 7 August, 2013.

64 B. Seidakhmetov, "Tadjikistan v ozhidanii oseni," *CentralAsia.ru*, 3 August, 2013.

with the EU and the U.S. According to some Russian analysts, the future agreements could well make it easier for Russians to travel to the West. Thus in this sense, the presence of Tajik and other Central Asian migrants could complicate the issue from the perspective of Western powers, who do not want to see Russia becoming a transit route for Central Asian migrants into the West. Russia allows Tajiks to move to Russia freely only because Dushanbe promised to allow Russia to have a military base in Tajikistan, according to agreement signed by Rakhmon and Putin in fall 2012.⁶⁵

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Pro-government news agency *Regnum* also noted that the former Soviet republics who encourage their citizens to go to Russia should remember that Russia is under no obligation to accept them, and that being in Russia is a privilege. Moreover, the number of migrants in Russia would decline if visa agreements are signed, and only those countries that belong to the so-called Eurasian Union, or at least have a good relationship with Russia, would be allowed to send migrants to Russia. Another Russian observer noted ominously that “Rakhmon is aware that if Russia loses its patience and sends back several planes full of deported Tajiks, it would lead to chaos in Dushanbe.”⁶⁶

It is clear that Kremlin does not trust Rakhmon’s assurances. Beyond the threats issued following Rakhmon’s visit, Moscow decided to pursue a broad policy of deporting at least a thousand illegal immigrants.⁶⁷ There were several reasons behind this. The large numbers of migrants became the symbol of all the ills of post-Soviet society and the dramatic changes in the demographic and cultural landscape of the country. Immigrants from Caucasus and Central Asia constitute the vast majority of immigrants, and are the target of prejudice and hatred from ethnic Russians. In early August 2013, soon after Putin’s meeting with Rakhmon, the Russian authorities appeared to decide to tackle the problem in earnest. There is a plan to build 83 camps for illegal immigrants in Russia, where they shall be detained and then deported. One of

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65 E. Chernenko, “Tadzhikistan poluchil rossiiskuiu notu v Facebook. MID obespekoben bezopasnost’iu posol’sstva v Dushanbe,” *Komersant*, 17 August, 2013.

66 I. Varfolomeeva, “Tadzhikskii tupik. Kreml’ nedovolen Rakhmonom,” *forum-msk.org*, 18 August, 2013.

67 Москва и Петербург повышают штрафы для мигрантов-нарушителей, *Ria Novosti*, August 2013, available at <http://ria.ru/society/20130809/955233827.html>

them has already been built in Moscow.⁶⁸ While the creation of the camps and the arrests of thousands of immigrants do not exclusively target Tajiks, the authorities clearly perceive this new policy as the way to pressure Tajikistan along with – indirectly – the other countries of Central Asia and Caucuses. As a matter of fact, Russian authorities have already deported 3,000 migrants in last half year and prevented the entry of 17,000.⁶⁹ Some of the deported were Tajiks and current policies of arresting and deporting Tajiks are quite similar to actions undertaken by Kremlin several years ago in retaliation to Dushanbe's arrest of a Russian pilot.⁷⁰ The deportations led to protests among the large Tajik diaspora in Russia whose representatives noted that the very notion of "illegal migrants" should not be applied to Tajiks, or other citizens of the countries of the former USSR with which Russia has a visa free arrangement.⁷¹

Limiting Tajik migration to Russia or expelling considerable numbers of them are certainly on the table. Creating problems with Tajik migrant workers could be the most painful for the Rakhmon regime, and social upheaval, like in nearby Kyrgyzstan, could indeed erupt.

Nonetheless, the Kremlin has indicated that it could end these arrangements and deport thousands of Tajiks and possibly other nationals whose governments have been in conflict with Moscow. This could exacerbate the economic, social and political problems in those countries. The withdrawal of Russian support and, especially, the problem with migrants, could cause Rakhmon's downfall. Indeed, in addition to the threat to limit the number of Tajik migrants, the Kremlin has attacked Rakhmon personally, implicitly mocking his attempts to be seen as a serious historian,⁷² and implying that he and his relatives are involved in drug trafficking.⁷³ All of these signals from Moscow indicated that Moscow continues to be irritated with Dushanbe and is consider how to manipulate Rakhmon in line with its policy needs, or simply arrange his ouster in favor of someone more amenable. Limiting Tajik migration to Russia or expelling considerable numbers of them are certainly on the table. Creating problems with Tajik migrant workers could be the most painful for the Rakhmon regime, and social upheaval,

68 "Slovo dnia," *Zavtra*, 5 August, 2013.

69 "Nachal'nik Moskovskoi politzii Anatolii Iakunin rasskazal o merakh po bor'be s nezakonnoi migratsiei," *Izvestiia*, 7 August, 2013.

70 "Aziia-Plus: Chistki v Moskve. Chego zhdai' tadjikskomu migrant?," *Asia-Plus*, 7 August, 2013.

71 Galem Faskhutdinov and Anatoli Vaiskopf, "Moskovskie metody for'by s nelegalami bespokoiat Tsentral'nuiu Aziiu," *Nemetskaia Volna*, 18 August, 2013.

72 "Karamzin otdykhaet. V Kuveite izdan V tomnyi uchenyi trud E. Rakhmona 'Tadjiki v zerkale istorii' na arabskom iazyke," *Central Asia.ru*, 25 June, 2013.

73 "N. Krasnov, geroinovyi potok iz Tadjikistana ne issiakaet," *CentralAsia.ru*, 6 August, 2013.

like in nearby Kyrgyzstan, could indeed erupt. The results of this social/political upheaval could be manifold and unpredictable. It is true that Moscow's plans could work, and that Kremlin would be able to install a puppet in Dushanbe. Or, the Kremlin's threat about an upsurge of Islamic fundamentalism and instability could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this case, not just Tajikistan but Uzbekistan could face trouble, in turn creating problems for Moscow itself. While it is unclear whether Moscow would indeed try to deport Tajik migrants en masse or at least create serious entry barriers for them, this scenario is quite possible and the result could be quite different to that desired by the Kremlin. By fall 2013, the Kremlin seemed to understand that for a variety of reasons, the project for deporting migrants, including Tajiks, on a massive scale would not be a realistic undertaking. Consequently, in late August, the Kremlin "created the favorable conditions for Tajik migrants" allowing them to stay in Russia for 15 days before registration.⁷⁴

At the same time, the Kremlin believes that Tajikistan has no other option but to follow its bidding. The commander of the Russian base refused to register their inventory with the local authorities or pay local taxes.⁷⁵ The Kremlin proclaimed that Dushanbe has no other option but to stick with Russia, for the West already sees Tajikistan as Russia's proxy.⁷⁶ While the political orientation of Dushanbe is questionable, it does not mean that it has Dushanbe relationship with Beijing continued to be strong. One observer noted that "Russia is Tajikistan's strategic partner only on paper and in verbal expressions. China is slowly but surely becoming the most important partner," largely because of its economic clout.⁷⁷ One might assume that Tajikistan's connection with China will deepen based on the new gas line from Turkmenistan to China, which would move through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁷⁸ While Dushanbe has continued to flirt with variety of foreign partners, it has still avoided irritating Moscow and caved in to Russian demands. Russia is officially allowed to

"Russia is Tajikistan's strategic partner only on paper and in verbal expressions. China is slowly but surely becoming the most important partner."

74 "Tadzhikskim migrantam razreshili ne vstavat' na uchët v RF 15 dni," *Novosti Kazakhstana*, 30 August, Forum-msk.org, 30 August, 2013.

75 "Kuliab Rossiiskaia voennaia baza ne khochet registirovat'sia v tadzhikskom BTI," *Radio Ozodi*, 5 September, 2013.

76 V. Panfilova, "Rakhmon zhdet odobreniia Kremliia Rossiiskuiu priviazali k prezidentskim vyboram," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 6 September, 2013.

77 Sadridin Kataev, "Kitaiskii aktsent tadzhikskoi politiki," *Central Asia*, 14 September, 2009.

78 "RO": 4-ia nitka Arkadaga. Novyi gazoprovod Turkmenistan – Kitai proidet cherez Tadzhikistan i Kirgiziiu," *Radio Ozodi*, 5 September, 2013.

keep its bases in Tajikistan at practically no cost. And at the same time, Moscow implicitly supported Rakhmon's re-election by allowing Tajik migrants to stay in Russia.

Conclusion

Moscow has clearly exhibited residual imperial ambitions in its attempt to solidify its position in the post-Soviet space. This is seen especially clearly in Central Asia. Critics of Putin's Eurasian Union project have stated that Moscow wants to restore the USSR under a different design. This is incorrect. Moscow has no military power to control Central Asia in the Soviet fashion, and moreover the Kremlin of the Soviet era demanded absolute control over its empire. Still, it spent lavishly on the economic and cultural development of the provinces, and often at the expense of the Russian heartland. This model is absolutely foreign to the present day Russian elite. It wants economic benefits from the other states, and displays no interest in investing in Central Asia or elsewhere for the sake of influence alone. Allowing thousands, if not millions, of migrants to work in Russia is one of the few benefits that Moscow can offer Central Asia. And the case of Tajikistan shows that this incentive works well, although it creates serious internal problems in Russia. The majority of ethnic Russians do not share the imperialist propensity of the political elite and see the influx of migrants as the source of many problems.